

The Development of Sekai Kyūseikyō in Thailand

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A Brief History of Sekai Kyūseikyō in Thailand

In 1968 the Okinawa branch of Sekai Kyūseikyō 世界救世教 sent their first missionary to Thailand. From the very beginning his policy was to enter into dialogue with representatives of religious groups in Thailand in order to make known both the distinctive features of Sekai Kyūseikyō teaching and the cooperative intention of the organization. It was asserted early on that the goal of Sekai Kyūseikyō was both the spiritual and physical betterment of mankind, and that this would take practical form if welcomed by Thais. Fruitful contacts were made with leading Buddhists, including officials in the Departments of Education and Religion, and with the Chief Brahman. The missionary was especially interested to learn from his contacts about points of common emphasis in belief and practice. He subscribed to the Sekai Kyūseikyō teaching that insights into ultimate Truth have been revealed to religious geniuses of any and every culture.

Having established a sympathetic relationship with some high-ranking individuals, he went on to promote the foundation of an agricultural school in Fang, Northern Thailand.¹ This opened in 1974 and offered training and accommodation to the sons of poor farmers in the area. It had already been established that such a scheme would be welcome, particularly in view of the aim of the Thai government to encourage alternative farming that might counter local temptation to grow crops for the drug trade. This scheme also suited Sekai Kyūseikyō's own philosophy, which stresses man's intimate relationship with nature and promotes what is termed "Nature Farming." The principal of the school was a former senior official with the Thai Ministry of Education who had become a member of Sekai Kyūseikyō.

¹ This was funded by the Mother Church in Atami, Japan.

Although the first missionary was having some success in making high-level contacts (leading to some membership from among government ministers and even to a visit by the Chief Patriarch of the Buddhists to the Mother Church in Atami, Japan), he found that no stable group was emerging from among the population at large. He had begun by offering Sekai Kyūseikyō's rite of "purification" (called *jōrei* 淨靈), believed to have healing properties, to anyone with interest or in need.

Sekai Kyūseikyō teaches that the divine force for good acts in the present age with special potency to eradicate "clouds" of suffering, and that members may act as transmitters of this force by performing *jōrei*. This is carried out by the member holding out his palm while in a prayerful state towards another person and is made possible by his wearing of an *ohikari* おひかり, an amulet worn around the neck. *Jōrei* is not dependent upon the moral or spiritual condition (or indeed any other quality) of either the transmitter or recipient, and membership is not a prerequisite for receiving *jōrei*. The missionary and his wife offered *jōrei* persistently to all with whom they came into contact. A steady trickle of people came to their home, chiefly because of word-of-mouth reports that healings might be forthcoming. Whether or not healings or other benefits were associated by recipients with *jōrei*, interest in Sekai Kyūseikyō teachings or in regular membership was negligible. The missionary estimated that in seven and a half years only some 250 people sustained any interest, and he admitted to lowered spirits.

A number of significant developments, however, took place in a short period of time. A Thai who had been learning Japanese in connection with business studies became a member and acted as an interpreter for the missionary, eventually becoming a minister himself. The foundation of the agricultural school led to interest and support from influential persons and to invitations to explain Sekai Kyūseikyō beliefs. On one occasion that the missionary now regards as seminally significant, he was invited to present Sekai Kyūseikyō teachings to a large gathering assembled in a prestigious *wat* in Chiang-mai. Classes of instruction were offered, using the services of the interpreter, and membership began to follow more frequently from initial contacts.

In 1978 a center was opened in Bangkok and the missionary feels that this has itself contributed to an increase in numbers and stability of the membership. It is a light, airy building of modern design situated in a residential area of Bangkok. Some of my informants confirmed the missionary's view when they spontaneously commented on the building, some contrasting it with the *wats*, which to them seemed dark and disorderly. From 1978 to 1981 membership quadrupled.²

² My observations and interviews reported here derive from a period of residence in Bangkok and Chiang-mai during 1981. While I spoke informally with many members and had

The Membership and Ministry

In 1981 there were some 8,000 Sekai Kyūseikyō members in Thailand, the vast majority of whom were Thais. Ministers estimated that approximately thirty percent of these were of Chinese extraction. It was also reported that some Japanese residents were members, but that their numbers were few. I saw none during my month of observation. There were 20 full-time ministers (of whom 4 were Japanese, including the head minister and his wife), 13 trainee ministers, 450 ministerial assistants and 18 trainee assistants. Ministerial tasks included leading services of worship, classes of instruction, visiting members who were invalids, and attending “home-gatherings” (meetings for prayer and exchange of testimony that took place in members’ homes). Only ministers are entitled to offer *jōrei* to more than one person simultaneously, but ministerial assistants might undertake many of the pastoral tasks and were especially involved in office work, record-keeping, and the reception of people coming to the centers in Bangkok and Chiang-mai. It will be appreciated that the public face of Sekai Kyūseikyō is predominantly Thai.

My observations in 1981 suggested that membership was chiefly drawn from the urban middle class of Thai society. Although some members were of very high social status, including generals in the Thai army and government ministers, some were of very low status, including urban and rural poor.³ Home visits were made to all alike and I was impressed by the sheer stamina involved in reaching members by public transportation in the heat and oppressive humidity. I vividly remember sitting next to an open sewer in the compound of a member’s home while she invited her neighbor (“possessed by evil spirits” and raving, tearing off her clothes, and screaming abuse) to be treated by the ministers. In all cases of home visits it was ruled that only very simple hospitality

many hours of meetings with the ministers, the term “interview” refers to more formal enquiries and discussions recorded verbatim with forty members. More details regarding my research methods and precautions taken can be found in E. M. A. Derrett, “The International Face of a Japanese ‘New Religion’,” (Unpublished Ph. D. thesis, University of London, 1984). My research now has the character of “history” but it transpired that Sekai Kyūseikyō in Thailand was at a turning point, for reasons that are elucidated by my studies. This case study, therefore, has value as observations of an early stage of acclimatization by a new religion in a foreign setting.

³ Sekai Kyūseikyō itself provides no breakdown of membership figures according to social status, gender, or age. I observed services of initiation, occasions of worship, and the daily flow of people into the center, and made enquiries of people where possible. Ministers also gave me their “informed guesses,” but as mine was not a sociological study I did not mount extensive surveys. I met representatives of the groups indicated above as well as teachers, civil servants, university teachers, owners of small businesses, housewives, and farm workers.

should be offered so that no burden should be imposed nor any status sought by a member seeking to impress others.

Women constitute approximately two-thirds of the membership and are especially active in service at the centers. In addition to people attending morning or evening worship, there was a steady flow of people to the center during weekdays; people engaged in individual prayer or service (which might take the form of cleaning part of the building or offering *jōrei* to others) were to be observed at all times. People under the age of twenty probably constitute no more than fifteen percent of the membership, but those interviewed commented favorably that they were allowed to participate fully. Involvement in training for posts of responsibility or advanced classes of instruction in Sekai Kyūseikyō teaching was not restricted by age or sex. All members were required to have attended three introductory classes covering the basic teachings of Sekai Kyūseikyō (which will be summarized below), to have received *jōrei* on at least ten occasions, and to have brought one other person into contact with Sekai Kyūseikyō. If these conditions had been fulfilled a person would be interviewed individually by a minister and asked his reasons for wanting an *ohikari*; this was not a formality and a person might be asked to give the matter further thought. Attendance at any advanced classes was on a purely voluntary basis and approximately 800 people had done so by 1981.

Ministers stated and interviews confirmed that most members are quite satisfied with basic instruction and tend to prefer individual attendance at centers to formal occasions of worship. Nevertheless, attendance at the special monthly services was such that these had to be held weekly in order to accommodate all those wishing to be present. These services consisted of gratitude offerings (of a monetary kind),⁴ offerings of rice and vegetables, testimonies by members, chanting of prayers and praises, and a sermon given by the head minister. Services were also occasions for passing on news or Sekai Kyūseikyō policy.

In summary, the impression given by Sekai Kyūseikyō in Thailand was of a peacefully bustling, loosely-knit membership with a predominant preference for individual performance of religious activities, but with a growing core of group-oriented and outward-reaching members. While the needs and views of the membership were transmitted to the ministerial hierarchy in Japan, policy was determined or approved in Japan. Nevertheless, the Thai branches were becoming more self-managing. Sekai Kyūseikyō seemed to be at a turning point with the

⁴ No particular amount or proportion of income is suggested, and ministers said that in practice offerings were on a small scale. Ministers' use of public transportation, for example, is related to the lack of possible expenditure on cars.

potential for rapid expansion; my prognosis was confirmed in 1982 when the membership increased to 16,605.

Bearing in mind the considerable strength of Buddhism, which permeates all aspects of Thai life today despite increasing secularization, the impact of Sekai Kyūseikyō would seem to be quite impressive. What do these figures and observations reflect about the extent to which, if at all, Sekai Kyūseikyō has laid claim to altered allegiance or beliefs or patterns of behavior? How may we characterize Sekai Kyūseikyō in Thailand and what seems to be its appeal? Has the Sekai Kyūseikyō familiar to observers in Japan transmitted any of its distinctive beliefs and features to Thais? It might appear that these are relatively simple questions. But do we, for example, seek to characterize the group with reference to Japanese models, or perhaps to the dominant religious institutions of Thailand itself? And in what terms and with reference to which theories of new religious movements should we seek to define, describe, or explain this phenomenon?

Approaching a Japanese New Religion Outside Japan

My research into the international dimensions of Sekai Kyūseikyō began when my reading about Japanese New Religions presented a picture that clashed considerably with the claims being made by Sekai Kyūseikyō itself about its global expansion and universalism. On visits to Atami (the headquarters of Sekai Kyūseikyō) during 1979 and 1980, I had also encountered non-Japanese members. Even allowing for some overly optimistic exaggeration of its claims, it appeared that Sekai Kyūseikyō was having greater impact outside Japan than was being given scholarly attention or even credence. Under most unusual circumstances it fell to me, a British theologian and non-member, to have open access to any branch I chose to study, and to live among its members. I chose to investigate the Sekai Kyūseikyō claims to internationalism primarily in two contexts: Brazil and Thailand. Subsequently, I may have experienced something of the frustrations felt by members of some New Religions when their claims are ignored or dismissed, for, when reporting some of my findings, I was sometimes met with frank skepticism that international expansion could be occurring at all among non-Japanese.

The study of Japanese New Religions has typically, although not exclusively, focused upon their context in the history of Japanese religion or upon them as expressions of social, economic, religious, and political upheaval.⁵ In broad terms we may say that it has been amply illustrated

⁵ Even a basic bibliography would be far too lengthy; I summarize types of approach in DERRETT 1984.

that Sekai Kyūseikyō's belief system and practices (like those of other comparable groups), such as spiritual healing, ancestor worship, and pilgrimages, can be described as a kaleidoscope of concepts, symbols, and emphases that have emerged from the Japanese religious heritage. Likewise, how traditional beliefs and practices may be understood by members of the New Religions themselves has received little attention (for exceptions to this generalization see DAVIS 1980 and SHIMAZONO 1979). Scholarly highlighting of continuity with the past, intriguing though this is, has tended to inhibit focus on innovative features of the groups' belief systems, such as international mission. This dimension has been almost entirely absent from Japanese religion until this century and is certainly not typical of folk religion, to which the New Religions are often compared. Some who have focused on their antecedents have expressed grave doubts whether transmission of beliefs could occur to non-Japanese (e.g., NORBECK 1970, p. 40; HSU 1975, p. 178; HAMBRICK 1974, p. 239). Leaving aside whether or not these scholars are right, students specializing in the history of Japanese religion had not found the international mission field their natural habitat in the early 1980s when I began my study.⁶

Considerable attention has been focused upon social, economic, and other factors correlating hypothetically to the emergence and popularity of the New Religions. While this is natural, there has also been a tendency to reductionism that has affected historical studies (e.g., KITAGAWA 1966, p. 317; MCFARLAND 1967 differs in his handling of traditional religion and of new religions, tending to refer to the latter in terms of "social functions").⁷ Where groups have claimed to have a universal message and mission they have often been dismissed, sometimes with a notable lack of scholarly objectivity (HINO 1964 cites examples). Where the appeal of new religions has been ascribed primarily to functional qualities suiting specific historical and cultural conditions, it is perhaps not surprising that their transmission elsewhere has seemed improbable.

It is widely recognized, nevertheless, how problematic are approaches to new religious movements that seek to define or "explain" them in terms of the conditions, needs, or desires of those who become affiliated (e.g., WILSON 1982, p. 115f; WALLIS 1979, pp. 3-52; CAMPBELL 1982; RICHES 1980, p. 41). Affiliation to a new religion is likely to be a response to particular conditions and these may be traceable and categorized, but

⁶ ELLWOOD 1974 provided some introductory material on new religions in California, but he reserved his detailed study to that of Tenrikyō in Japan (1982).

⁷ DAVIS 1980 (p. 9) is highly critical of the rather dismissive and superior manner in which some scholars have written about members of new religions as if they were pawns in the process of social upheaval.

the specific character and potential of a group must be explained in terms of how it makes responses and how it channels and stimulates attitudes and behavior within a particular context. It is how it does this that determines its features, social organization, and stance vis-à-vis the wider society and other religions. The response cannot be defined in terms of conditions because it is channeled by interpretations not themselves reducible to expressions of particular conditions (BELLAH 1962, pp. 207–209; MATSUMOTO 1970, pp. 6–7; BARKER 1982, p. 5; PESSAR 1982). We do not need to dismiss a group's potential for universalism because of the distinctive conditions surrounding its emergence, nor do we need to posit highly similar conditions in terms of social upheaval or whatever in order to account for expansion. The history of world religions has amply illustrated that the origin of a religion is highly distinctive and that even a chauvinist culture does not preclude universalistic teachings or expansion. Contrasting manifestations of a religion, arising perhaps because of different cultural "glasses" through which it is perceived, do not inevitably negate a claim to universalism.

Nevertheless, it is interesting to enquire whether and to what extent Sekai Kyūseikyō may be acting as a "culture-broker" in its mission in Thailand, intentionally or otherwise.⁸ How significant is the "Japanese face" of Sekai Kyūseikyō? The organization as a whole has been aware of this. This can be seen especially in their promotion of Japanese arts, something the founder Okada Mokichi 岡田茂吉 (1882–1955) saw as encapsulating and expressing Japan's spiritual strength. In my brief presentation of Sekai Kyūseikyō's message and image, I shall give some attention to the issue of whether Thai members' understanding of Sekai Kyūseikyō teachings is conducive to the promotion of universal Japanese-ness as opposed to Japanese universalism.

Methodology

I focused attention on the role of beliefs, by which I mean convictions, interpretations, or assumptions, informed from a number of sources, including religious. Using a system of detailed interviews and observation, I examined how members interpreted key areas of their experience. In particular, I probed their interpretation of membership and its implication. These varied, of course, from person to person. I did not assume that Sekai Kyūseikyō doctrine would exclusively or even predominantly encapsulate members' beliefs, but would note if and how any term or concept distinctive to Sekai Kyūseikyō was used or explained.

⁸ LOEWEN 1975 refers to the transmission of culture-specific values and forms of behavior alongside a religious message as "culture-broking."

I studied how beliefs channeled responses to conditions and experiences and affected the social, economic, and other features of the group. I worked on the premise that beliefs are inseparably related to the perception of conditions and serve to legitimate responses to them. While it might appear that a religion's offer of healing, enhanced soteriological status, sympathetic personal attention, etc., ought to elucidate its functions and match social and other factors in its context of expansion, in fact we may be misled if we seek to define the group in such terms. My comparative study enabled me to analyze strikingly different interpretations of apparently identical provisions of Sekai Kyūseikyō, such as healing, and that these interpretations correlated with differing patterns of membership behavior that affected the features and potential of Sekai Kyūseikyō in the various contexts.⁹ How Sekai Kyūseikyō presents itself, of course, has to be taken into account, since the group inevitably has to make itself comprehensible. This may involve adopting culture-specific language, symbols, etc. In focusing on beliefs, I recognized the considerable difficulties involved but regarded such an attempt as methodologically necessary as well as inherently interesting, and discovered it to be most illuminating. I do not, of course, suggest that beliefs exist apart from other factors in determining people's behavior. I feel, however, that they may be very revealing about processes of change taking place within societies (though this problem lies outside the scope of my study).

In what follows I will give a summary of Sekai Kyūseikyō's presentation of its message and practices in Thailand, followed by some insights into Thai members' understanding thereof and possible correlations of these to features of religion in Thailand. In the process I will note how the Japanese face of Sekai Kyūseikyō is presented and received.

The Message and its Presentation

THEOLOGY, SOTERIOLOGY, AND ASSOCIATED RITUAL PRACTICE¹⁰

Sekai Kyūseikyō proclaims the eruption into the world of the full force of the absolute divine being, the Creator and Sustainer of the universe, entitled *Sushin* 主神. *Sushin*, having worked throughout the ages in all cultures through all deities and enlightened ones, is now working for the creation of an earthly paradise through Okada Mokichi and his followers. The divine power is at work to dispel "clouds" of impurity that inhibit the world's well-being. These "clouds" have their origins in

⁹ For a summary of observations and conclusions drawn from study in Brazil and Thailand, see DERRETT 1983.

¹⁰ DERRETT 1984 provides the only detailed systematic presentation of the Sekai Kyūseikyō belief-system available in English, of which this is a very brief summary.

mankind's ethical and spiritual failings. *Sushin* works in this final age especially through *Miroku Ōmikami* 大光明真神 (a composite name which suggests divine activity towards a paradisaal state). In Thailand the concept of *Sushin* is presented in introductory classes, but more emphasis is placed on the way in which Sekai Kyūseikyō is the medium for Phra Sri Arya Maitreya (popularly Phra Sri Arn). Miroku and Maitreya are the names given respectively in Japanese and Thai Buddhist traditions to the Future Buddha who presides over the future age of bliss. What Sekai Kyūseikyō proclaims is "realized eschatology,"¹¹ the present availability of well-being through access to spiritual power that purifies the spiritual world. All experience is said to have its origin in the spiritual realm, and thus material and physical well-being follows spiritual treatment. Okada's enlightenment and possession by divine beings enabled him to transmit knowledge of this spiritual order, including how man ought to live in order to eradicate the "clouds" in himself and in his environment and how to transmit the power that purifies. In brief summary, these are the explanations given for following Okada's teachings concerning moral and practical issues and for receiving and giving *jōrei*.

According to Sekai Kyūseikyō, the Divine Light enters the world from a site in Hakone, Japan, where there is a sanctuary of strikingly modern design representing or actualizing the flow of power from the spiritual realm. While this site is in Japan and is surrounded by gardens of traditional design, it is notable that the sanctuary does not conform to traditional styles of architecture. Photographs of this sanctuary available in Thailand do not suggest striking Japaneseness, although they certainly have an exotic quality. None of my informants had noticed any photographs at all, however. Far more heavily emphasized than the Divine Light sanctuary is *jōrei*, which may be transmitted by any member who wears the *ohikari*. The source of the power is given whatever title deemed appropriate in the context (being *Deus* in Brazil, for example), but the rite of transmission is always termed *jōrei*. Thus it is not a Japanese god who is being preached but the distinctiveness of Sekai Kyūseikyō's mediation. *Jōrei* is not associated with Japanese religious specialists, since all members can transmit it.

Okada himself is presented as being a medium of divine power and prayers may be addressed to him in the spiritual realm.¹² During his life he practiced spiritual healing, and examples of miracles wrought by him are cited in readings used during worship and in sermons. His potency is said to continue in the present and his teachings are presented as

¹¹ As in Christianity, there is tension between the "realized" and the "yet to come," but this term may fairly be borrowed from New Testament studies.

¹² No attempt is made in Thailand to convey the concept of "living kami."

authoritative on wide-ranging matters. In Thailand it is stressed that his teachings and powers are especially for the new age of *Phra Sri Arn*, thus that they are tailored to time-related conditions and not in conflict in any way with those of the Buddha Gautama. This also accurately reflects the view of Okada presented in Japan, but it has been a vital emphasis in Thailand. This was reflected in the head minister's statements about early missionary experience and in spontaneous statements by informants. One stated, for example, that she had inquired whether Sekai Kyūseikyō stood for Buddhist principles before contacting the group; although members reported having had little or no information about Sekai Kyūseikyō other than that it might be a source of healing or other benefits (in the majority of cases), it was apparent that respect for the Buddha was universal. Another socially aware informant indicated that she had rejected Communism as a path to amelioration of inequalities "because they have no respect for the Dharma." Similarly, an officer in the Thai army confessed that he suffered great personal disquiet because his duty conflicted with the pacifist principles of the Buddha (his membership in Sekai Kyūseikyō related in part to his belief that deficiencies in his own spiritual condition must have led to his calling). These statements in themselves reveal appreciation of the key teachings of Sekai Kyūseikyō outlined above and indicate that we are not dealing with the kind of unsophisticated, poorly educated, or unthinking membership that some early studies would have us believe is necessarily the case in Japanese New Religions.¹³

In Thai presentations of Okada, emphasis is placed on his example as one dedicated to the service of mankind and on his practical advice for everyday problems. For example, Okada's teachings often refer to the necessity for punctuality as a mark of consideration for others. The uniqueness of his role, stressed heavily by Japanese and Brazilian members, is muted when presentations are made in Thailand. His photograph is placed in a prominent position in the center (and may be found in the homes of some members), but beside it is a photograph of the Thai king and queen. It is a photograph of the Patriarch of Thai Buddhists greeting Sekai Kyūseikyō's spiritual leader that is found in the entrance hall. It seems clear that Sekai Kyūseikyō has found that other sources of legitimation must be appropriated.

Divine power is believed to be especially potent in the *goshintai*, a scroll upon which Okada had written characters for the divine name. This scroll and Shinto-style furnishings and worship utensils give the Sekai Kyūseikyō center a distinctively Japanese atmosphere. Ministers and the majority of members everywhere pay respect to the scroll with the bows

¹³ See VAN STRAELEN 1957, p. 104; OFFNER and VAN STRAELEN 1963, p. 104.

and handclaps Japanese traditionally use at sacred places. Sekai Kyūseikyō places emphasis on the importance of worship that establishes an individual in humble relationship before Deity (by whatever name). One may observe prospective members and others coming to a center to receive *jōrei* being shown the proper form. Noticeable characteristics of Thai performance of ritual were the precision with which they were conducted, the silence that prevailed when *jōrei* was being given, and the loud chanting of prayers.

The liturgy used in prayer and praise to Phra Sri Arn (or Miroku) is in Japanese and transliterated for those unable to read the Japanese characters. It is taught that the language used is itself sacred and effective, a claim attached in Thailand to its specific content. Translations were available in Thai, although not printed with the service booklets. The prayers speak of the purifying power of Deity and Its loving purpose in making an earthly paradise; they offer praise and gratitude, especially for the blessings experienced in Nature. Those parts of the service addressed to man are delivered in Thai. In Thailand the relative obscurity of much of the liturgy, especially for those who cannot read at all, is less puzzling than it might otherwise be (as in Brazil, for example, where there has been a demand for Portuguese translations of books), since traditional Buddhist rites have long been widely incomprehensible. The foreign origin of Okada and of the ritual practices would be immediately appreciated on entry into the Sekai Kyūseikyō centers, but that this was of Japanese origin appeared to be of little or no significance or indeed interest. To only two of those interviewed had the Japanese origin of Sekai Kyūseikyō reportedly been of interest prior to contact with the religion; in one case it was because she had been told that there was a Japanese doctor who might have different methods to treat her persistent illness, and in the other it was because her nervous condition was attributed to a traumatic encounter with Japanese during the war. When I asked whether that had not, rather, put her off from approaching the religion, she replied that of course there were good and bad in every race and that as Buddhists they had been taught "to be kind to the defeated."

"Paradise on Earth" is the goal of Sekai Kyūseikyō, which would consist of the absence of suffering, international peace and understanding, and the constantly beneficial functioning of Nature. While this might well be a universal hope, is the envisaged goal of Sekai Kyūseikyō essentially Japanese? Does its attainment perhaps involve Japanizing the world in any way? Okada spoke of the contributions to be made by all cultures to the final paradisaical state of the world and was eclectic in his own interests, but it probably is impossible for anyone to conceive of a paradise that is altogether culturally alien to one's own experience. Sekai Kyūseikyō does in fact present visual images of prototypes of par-

adise that have been constructed in Japan. Photographs of these are presented in magazines, etc., and depict splendid buildings set in dramatic natural landscapes and gardens. The major buildings are, however, more striking for their modernity of design than for their distinctive Japaneseness. The combination of images of gardens and buildings may suggest or reinforce the notions of Japan as a nation that has achieved modernity and entered the new age. Photographs in newsletters very often depict non-Japanese on pilgrimages to Japanese sites and the image is of a Japan-centered religion. That this is so need not reflect what WERBLOWSKY (1967) has termed "spiritual imperialism," but rather the needs of the Japanese founder and Sekai Kyūseikyō membership in the early years. Very few Thai members had been to Japan, with the exception of some very wealthy members and prospective ministers. It should be noted that the latter, like the Brazilian ministers, had been involved in pastoral and missionary work in Japan as part of their training.

The virtues extolled whereby a person can participate in an ever-improving world might well be described as typically Japanese in emphasis. Humility, self-control, consideration, and all attitudes leading to social harmony are stressed. Social organization as recommended by Okada is described as democratic, but in practice the system of committees reporting upwards means that an elite group of leaders gives guidance to the membership after consultations. In Thailand ministers reported and members' statements confirmed that practice of service to others and cleaning communal rooms or offering refreshments had to be insisted on from members of higher social standing, which had come as a shock to some. In Okada's writings, from which readings are taken during worship, what he calls "broad love" is praised and "narrow love" is criticized as a kind of chauvinism that promotes the gain of one's own firm, nation, or family, or worse, oneself alone, rather than the absolute standards of honesty, compassion, or justice.

An important aspect of Sekai Kyūseikyō teaching is that it is through Time that the Deity is working out its purpose; all efforts by mankind are as yet only approximations to an ideal that is yet to be achieved anywhere. The teaching allows Sekai Kyūseikyō to "bend to the wind" when encountering culture-specific ways of approaching issues, although ministers do give guidance on specific problems or choices. In one instance a member had thought himself duly selfless when he stood by quietly watching somebody steal his bicycle, but the minister explained that this was not proper practice of compassion. Sekai Kyūseikyō ministers encourage members' participation in schemes for social welfare sponsored by the government. One project in which several members were active in 1981 was for the support of the families of drug addicts. Ministers will also attend such events as funerals conducted according to Buddhist rites to give support to bereaved members; in view of the

length of time involved for such ceremonies, this is by no means a token performance on their part. Thais have been encouraged to develop a greater sense of group-orientation through the system of “home-gatherings” (an idea adopted in Japan from Brazilian practice), but this has proved slow to be established on any scale.

THE NATURE OF HUMAN BEINGS

The “Person” to whom Sekai Kyūseikyō addresses itself is made up of a complex spiritual “body” and a physical body. It is taught that each person has a divine component that is his connection with the *Sushin* and that can dominate his “animalistic spirit” if allowed to do so. He also has a *yūkon* 幽魂 that remains in the spiritual realm and moves through various states according to the behavior of the earth-bound Man. Impurities, such as immorality, neglect of the spiritual dimensions of life, abuse of Nature or the ingestion of toxins can all “cloud” its pure condition and affect a person’s physical experience. The whole process is cumulative over several lives; links established between an individual and others over generations, especially with relations,¹⁴ continue at a spiritual level, and because of the process of rebirths means that a person may be intimately linked spiritually with people of other races. It is the spiritual realm that is the origin of all human experience, including that of natural disasters, and thus spiritual remedies are appropriate to physical or material ills.

The above is a summary of the analysis of cause and effect presented in pre-membership classes in Thailand. More detailed explanation of matters relating to ancestors, varieties of heavenly or hellish realms, and the existence of types of evil spirits are reserved for more advanced classes. What is required for a potential member to understand is that *jōrei* is effective upon the spiritual nature of an individual, thus ameliorating his physical experience and moral condition, and that a person is essentially a moral category of being whose mission is to help create the salvation that he will merit by spiritual purification and moral effort.

The Reception of the Message in Thailand

Ministers and members dispense *jōrei* to all without prerequisite membership. Thus, to become a member is an act of deliberate decision and involves acceptance of Sekai Kyūseikyō authority at least to some extent.

¹⁴ Rites for ancestors play a part in Sekai Kyūseikyō ritual life in Japan but had only recently been introduced as an annual service before my visit to Thailand. There was reportedly little interest in this; most members who referred to rites for ancestors confessed to neglecting the traditions of their own families.

Historically it was not until classes of instruction were available that any significant increase and stability in membership occurred. Which aspects of the teachings seem to have fallen on most fertile ground, and how are they understood? How may we elucidate Sekai Kyūseikyō's appeal?

The great majority of members originally approached the center in search of a cure. While some informants referred to their hope of help for other misfortunes, such as emotional or financial troubles, these were a minority and ministers confirmed that word-of-mouth reports of healings gave rise to most contacts. Sekai Kyūseikyō does not advertise itself formally in any way. A key area to investigate is members' understanding of potential or actual healings; "miracles" constitute Sekai Kyūseikyō's own chief evidence for the truth of its message, i.e., its authority. Its understanding may be summarized as follows: if and when healings or other beneficial experiences can be seen to follow practices advocated by the founder, these act as proofs of his authoritative insight into the workings of spiritual forces or laws, and of his participation in the source of power that achieves the results, and his ability to enable others to share in its transmission. Thus an extra-personal source of wisdom and power, the Sushin (Deus, or whatever), has been tapped and miracles are therefore the evidence for Sekai Kyūseikyō's authority. Brazilian members, for example, were found to perceive miracles in this way, and experience or even observation of beneficial experience following *jōrei* led them to conclude emphatically that Okada is the "messiah" for the new age. The conversionist¹⁵ character of Sekai Kyūseikyō is very marked in Brazil, where members have even begun to replace traditional religious rituals, such as baptism of infants, with Sekai Kyūseikyō rites.

For the most part, interviews with Thai members revealed a striking difference of interpretation. They typically believed that they had experienced some benefit from *jōrei* and from practicing the teachings, but any conclusions reached were based on personal experience and were regarded as experimental. Whereas Brazilian members reported their first experiences in detail and frequently referred to those of others, Thai members tended to express hopes for further experience and did not necessarily conclude that the crucial factor in experience was Okada or even Phra Sri Arn. For a few of those interviewed the very existence of a spiritual power was open to query. Benefits might result from a pos-

¹⁵ I use the term here to describe a situation involving transformation in knowledge structure and of performance and adoptions of a new reference group; see WILSON 1973. A discussion of how styles of interpretation and sources of human experience may affect such developments is in DERRETT 1984, chapter 7.

itive thought-transference from transmitter to recipient. All those interviewed claimed to have experienced some benefit from receiving *jōrei*, but these were not necessarily the cures for which they had originally come, or not total cures. The most frequently mentioned benefit of membership, after the possibility of healing, was improved potential to “make merit.” Improved states of mind or emotion and more sympathetic attitudes towards others were very important to the majority of those interviewed. One member encountered outside the center, for example, explained later that she had come precisely because she found *jōrei* to be an effective means of dealing with her temper. Interviews revealed that most members conceived that two complementary expedients were being made available whereby to experience benefit from membership.

Of the 40 interviewed in detail, 30 attested to the potency of Phra Sri Arn, with whom the devotee could enter into reciprocal relationship through *jōrei* and worship. Thai members conceived that one might enter into such relationships with a range of potent beings and that by offering the prescribed ritual performance, tokens of appreciation, etc., one might receive blessing out of the being’s own potency. Phra Sri Arn is the being to whom Sekai Kyūseikyō allows access. All descriptions of this figure reflected popular Buddhist traditions about the Future Buddha, but several commented that until contact with Sekai Kyūseikyō they had thought of him as “a fairy story.” The concept that he might be active in the present was regarded as novel. Effects associated with *jōrei* were ascribed to his potency because it was considered by the informant that she or he could not have achieved such improvements on the grounds of personal merit. That Sekai Kyūseikyō provides means of access to the compassion of a potent being was a significant appeal, as was well expressed by one member:

Most Buddhist teachings are beyond people. It says to get rid of defilements through meditation and wisdom. The first stage is meditation. I have tried for two years. You have to keep your mind unattached, making your mind free by concentrating on one point, such as breathing. If you attain that state you have to use wisdom to consider realities. There are several stages with difficult terms. It is the principle of Hīnayāna to depend on yourself, not on any deity. How many people can possibly do that? Personally I think it can’t work for me. This religion gives you something else. You don’t have to depend entirely on yourself. You have the divine ray to purify.

The Sushin was referred to by only six of the informants, only one of whom suggested that an individual might be spiritually connected to It in any way. He explained that he had considered that there must be a

Creator Deity before contact with Sekai Kyūseikyō. Okada was referred to as a source of potency by all but six of the informants. He is the mediator of power from Phra Sri Arn and a revealer of teachings for the needs of the modern period, but informants often contrasted him with the Buddha Gautama, with whom absolute authority rests.

Meishu-sama [a Japanese title for Okada] is still attached to worldly business; he wouldn't go to Nirvāṇa. He has good intentions to help, . . . [and] people need this kind of person, someone to rely on and to ask for help and not be rejected.

Okada's qualifications for elevated status, when referred to, consisted chiefly of his service to others and "enlightenment": "Meishu-sama is like special monks who do deep meditation." His power, which for some was evidenced through answers to their prayers in times of crisis, was said to have the particular function of creating an earthly paradise. Furthermore, his making of the *goshintai*, *ohikari*, and teachings on Nature Farming were cited as distinctive aspects of his role. Some informants, however, had only a minimal knowledge of him.

While the majority of informants stated that miracles attested to Sekai Kyūseikyō's provision of access to potent compassionate beings, all stressed that vital to any experience was the attitude or state of mind of the individual. Whether *jōrei* or any other practice is effective, and to what extent, is dependent on the *gamma* (karma) of the individual. Each individual is ultimately responsible for his or her own experience in the world. "Everything depends on the state of one's mind," as one member said. Thai members found Sekai Kyūseikyō teachings about spiritual causes for physical effects entirely congenial, although some doubts were expressed about the complex picture of a person's spiritual makeup. After all, said one, when people see ghosts they see one spirit, not two. This kind of critical consideration of Sekai Kyūseikyō teaching was typical. Experiences in this lifetime were considered to be the result of moral choices made over aeons and were regarded as the individual's own "fault." When I remarked that no notion of anatta seemed to be reflected in members' statements, he replied that this was too difficult a concept to understand despite sincere study.

In addition to help from a potent being, what was necessary was a means of *thambun* (accumulating merit). Informants found Sekai Kyūseikyō to provide expedients to make merit, thus combating defilements already accumulated and helping to produce an enhanced life now or shortened periods in purgatories. The authority cited for such statements is that of the Buddha Gautama, although it is noted that Okada is in broad agreement. *Jōrei* in particular is appealing to members because whether or not one is certain of its power, one is acting compassionately

when giving *jōrei*. Simultaneously one may be in direct relationship with Phra Sri Arn. As one informant said in English:

If there really is a God, my coming here and giving *jōrei* may help people and make them happy. . . . I pray this, "Please, if my coming here is really of any service to our fellow people, please make me come here more often." . . . I have never believed in anything except myself.

The Sekai Kyūseikyō center provides a friendly pool of people to whom to offer service and, for a significant minority of members, *jōrei* also provided the means to offer service to needy strangers if the occasion arose. The way in which Sekai Kyūseikyō practices enable active demonstrations of compassion was heavily emphasized. As one member explained: "When you practice the precepts of Buddhism, you only get happier yourself. With *jōrei* you can help others. As a Buddhist, when you meet someone who's ill, you can only have pity, you can't help and cure." Another member, who had lived in the Philippines, also contrasted Sekai Kyūseikyō with Roman Catholicism: "They just say 'Keep on praying.' Here we can help."

The teachings of Okada on the importance of making religion "relevant to ordinary life" were regarded as valuable by the great majority of informants. They reported that they had become more aware that "ordinary people" are able to make merit in the course of their mundane duties. This could be achieved through changed attitudes towards others. One informant spoke of how she had resented the way in which her relatives had left her to care for an invalid brother, but of how she now responded to them all with greater compassion and had the satisfaction of being able to channel *jōrei* to her brother. She explained that Okada's teachings that one's experience was the result of one's past deeds had helped her to avoid dissension with others and to respond peaceably to situations of everyday aggravation. Informants claimed that they were better able to cope with a wide variety of stressful situations, such as being a second wife or suffering constant pain, knowing that they were making merit. The extent to which a person was able to follow the teachings or to experience benefit from *jōrei* was ascribed to his or her own karmic condition. Some stated that they found the teachings too difficult to put into practice because of their own inadequacies. Adoption of practices or acceptance of teachings was typically individualistic,¹⁶ and Thai members made no claims for the absolute truth of the teachings. It was widely felt that they were applicable if and when an individual's need rendered them so. The strong impression given by interviews was of a

¹⁶ See EMBREE 1950, pp. 181–92, and COUGHLIN 1960 for examinations of such tendencies in Thailand.

membership highly aware of falling short of ideals and spiritual heights outlined as goals by traditional Buddhism, and for whom Sekai Kyūseikyō offered accessible means and supernatural aid to improve. Buddhism as practiced by monks and nuns was referred to as being “too far from ordinary life,” and one woman said “Monks are afraid of women, anyway,” explaining why she had felt alienated from traditional practice.¹⁷ Some informants hypothesized that Sekai Kyūseikyō might be appropriate to the modern period and to many living therein because it was an age of loss of values applicable to everyday life. Many were critical of trends in modern Thailand and of the increase in incidence of violence and of materialism.¹⁸ One said that, although she would have liked to have children, she was glad not to have been responsible for bringing a child into the modern world.

For 14 of the 40 members in my sample, however, a shift had occurred in their thinking that resulted in considerable emphasis on the determinative role of Phra Sri Arn. They did not believe that the state of the individual was all-important. In the course of long, anecdotal explanations, these members told of how they had, often very hesitantly at first, offered *jōrei* to total strangers outside the center. One, for example, had seen a woman in the market being bitten by a dog and, despite a crowd, gave *jōrei*, which relieved the pain. After this incident the member went on to offer *jōrei* to others with increasing confidence. Critical self-examination and guidance from ministers led these members to conclude that it could not be the result of their own merit that they saw in cures, but the present activity of the Future Buddha in the world. These members had gone on to take more advanced classes in Sekai Kyūseikyō teaching and were most knowledgeable about technical terms and details of Okada's life. They tended to be active in pastoral aspects of Sekai Kyūseikyō work and in voluntary service at the center. For them the group was not simply an aggregate of individuals in personal relationship with Phra Sri Arn, but a potent vehicle for improving the world. Okada's authority and that of his successors in ministry was asserted. Their view of their own status had shifted radically because their condition and fate no longer depended on themselves alone. One member explained that “in Sekai Kyūseikyō all members are little bodhisatts; all can channel *jōrei* to others. The *ohikari* means that the divine ray will pass to the *yūkon* and will channel through me to other people. But we are only little bodhisatts.” Similarly, another member said that “with Sekai

¹⁷ See MULDER 1977 for a study of the decline of traditional Buddhist practice especially among the middle classes in urban Thailand.

¹⁸ See EMBREE 1950, p. 188, and PROMSIRI 1969.

Kyūseikyō you don't individually have to reach a high stage before passing power."

Even among these members, however, there was little agreement about a coming earthly paradise. They were more likely than others to assert that it was possible to help bring the age of Phra Sri Arn nearer and nearer, but like others their goal was the ultimate attainment of nibban (nirvāṇa). They speculated that Sekai Kyūseikyō's work could bring paradise nearer, but all were unsure on this question. The majority had personal goals, such as to deserve a better rebirth or to avoid hells, and there was none of the world-affirmation that is a typical feature of Sekai Kyūseikyō teaching.

In summary, Sekai Kyūseikyō members' statements in Thailand revealed critical, individualistic approaches with conclusions reached on the basis of personal experience often assessed in the light of traditional beliefs. Sekai Kyūseikyō is perceived to offer "assisted self-determination" to achieve specific immediate goals, but, more importantly, long-term goals of personal improvement and a greater sense of self-worth are pursued. For a minority there was also a sense of being able to affect their environment for the better, but this was seen as being in itself only part-way to Man's ultimate goal, which is nibban, "not to be reborn." That members conceived of their experience as relating so crucially to individual criteria has reduced Sekai Kyūseikyō's capacity to claim authority based on provision of miracles. The actual incidence of "miracles" reported by Brazilian and Thai members did not seem to differ either in number per informant and his relatives, nor in type. Thai members, however, were typically seeking more miracles, while Brazilian members were most concerned to be instruments in bringing benefits to others. This observation was elucidated on recognition of the differing ways in which experience was typically interpreted. It would seem that Sekai Kyūseikyō in Thailand has established its authority to prescribe ritual and other practices in so far as it is seen to conform to traditional Thai Buddhist beliefs as popularly understood and as applied to the needs and conditions of modern "ordinary people."

Characteristics of Sekai Kyūseikyō in Thailand as Corollaries of Beliefs

Individual goal-orientation and understanding of the self as determinative of experience helps to a great extent to account for a widespread lack of identification with the group; this in turn tends to reduce support of group projects and significant financial offerings. Where attitude is so important the actual amount of monetary offerings may be slight. Lack of literature available to the membership and continuing dependence on the Mother Church for sponsorship, e.g., of buildings, relates to relative impecuniousness. Since most members consider that they

have great need for continuing purification and do not see their membership as conferring high soteriological status upon them (perhaps in some cases even the reverse), they do not typically conceive of themselves as in a stance of opposition to "the wider world." They may distinguish between pre- and post-membership for themselves, but not between membership and non-membership states. This denies to Sekai Kyūseikyō the missionary zeal that is so typical in Brazil, except for the minority referred to above. Similarly, there is no withdrawal from previous practice, although in many cases that had lapsed already.

The great care taken with ritual observance in the center reflects members' concern to play their part in reciprocal relationship with Phra Sri Arn and, in some cases, with Okada. Although the teachings of the latter are seen as helpful guides to attitudes and behavior, members' understanding of his role and status do not lend themselves to imitation of him as a historical person. This reduces the extent to which Sekai Kyūseikyō could act as a "culture broker," even if it intended to do so. The Japan-centered character of the group as perceived in Japan and Brazil is not at all widely appreciated in Thailand.

The minority understanding of Phra Sri Arn as chiefly determinative of beneficial experience following *jōrei* has, however, given rise to a core of membership that is prepared to be more directed by Sekai Kyūseikyō and to engage in outreach activities. Significant increases in membership would explicablely have followed their missionary activity and involvement in leading introductory classes, personal reception of people approaching the center, and follow-up of prospective members. In 1981 Sekai Kyūseikyō did have the potential for numerical growth in Thailand. The stability of the membership was also in a position to be enhanced, although at the time of my research it appeared to relate more to members' perception of themselves as requiring ongoing aid than to any notion that Sekai Kyūseikyō presents absolute Truth. This contrasts with the Brazilian situation.

The appeal of Sekai Kyūseikyō relates in part to the way in which it is perceived as offering satisfaction to desires for improved conditions, but unless we examine how experience of "miracles" is interpreted we cannot elucidate why this leads to any stable affiliations. In the Thai case, as we have seen, this seems to relate to Sekai Kyūseikyō's success in teaching that the spiritual causes of ills need ongoing attention and that its treatment requires new stances in relationship with Phra Sri Arn and other powers, human and divine, to which it offers access. Sekai Kyūseikyō's expedients are found to be within the intellectual and practical reach of people who reported themselves frustrated with alternatives. Sekai Kyūseikyō's key practices by-pass the need for "religious specialists," while its teachings conform to ideals preached by traditional

“specialists,” at least in so far as these would be practicable for lay persons.

It may be that Sekai Kyūseikyō's appeal lies in part in its legitimation of people's desires for physical, material, and social well-being by association of their achievement with the Future Buddha. Ultimately legitimate ideals are those prescribed by the Buddha Gautama, but he is believed to have predicted the dispensation of the Buddha Maitreya.¹⁹ Sekai Kyūseikyō has brought this into present relevance for Thai members. Its approach thus shares features with measures taken by modern Thai lay movements, by the modern Sangha, and by the Thai government in being addressed to the amelioration of material and social conditions and in their legitimation with the ideal of compassionate action (TAMBIAH 1976). Sekai Kyūseikyō's provisions may thus represent a resolution of a dilemma posed by conflict between value placed on progress in material terms and value placed on non-attachment. The statements of educated middle- and upper-class informants strongly suggest this possibility. So strong is the Buddhist ideal, however, that Sekai Kyūseikyō's expedients are regarded as temporary and do not lead to world affirmation.

Sekai Kyūseikyō's appeal seems also to be related to its contrast with Buddhist institutions as experienced by members. Monks and nuns were seen to be withdrawn from interest in the lives or concerns of the majority and their preaching to the laity was said to be inaccessible, especially in Bangkok. That monks themselves might not abide by the Dharma was also suggested by a few informants. Dissatisfaction with medicine was also expressed, and it may be that Thai members' interpretations of the source of human experience helps to elucidate this. Medicine is presented as being “universally effective,” in the sense that medication “X” is proposed as a cure for all experience of condition “Z.” Thai informants, however, typically saw their experiences as caused by factors unique to themselves. When medication fails, then, it may be concluded that it is simply not suited to the individual. The medication, as a result, may be abandoned more readily than it is in the West where experience is typically understood to derive largely from extra-personal sources (e.g., God, Nature, the government, etc.).

Thai members experience “re-situation” in relation to others both because of the rite of *jōrei* and because of the teachings regarding “making others happy” as a priority. Being able to “accumulate merit” in such ways is of key importance to Thai members, as has been shown. It may be that this is an appeal at a social as well as a spiritual level, although

¹⁹ This legitimation has been used by Thai politicians in the modern period to support progressive policies; see TAMBIAH 1976, p. 497.

the general preference for individual worship rather than congregational worship and the initial hesitance to participate in home-gatherings suggest that getting to know others or being part of a group is not a motive for affiliation. Being "re-situated" in a wider society as a potentially helpful contributor may be of more importance, although we cannot posit a need for such a provision, especially since a significant proportion of members already pursue professional lives of public service. It may be that Sekai Kyūseikyō's emphasis is simply congenial to the ideals and experience of such people.

The Japanese origin of Sekai Kyūseikyō may hypothetically relate to its appeal if Japan is regarded as exemplary of adaptation to modernity and if the images of Japan presented serve to suggest this. No members' statements can be cited as support for this suggestion, however. Sekai Kyūseikyō's ability to appeal to Thais in the ways suggested above would seem to relate to its Japanese heritage, however, since its teachings encapsulate what we call the Buddhist interpretation of causation, the Shinto emphasis on accessible supernatural power in the midst of ordinary life, and the Confucian emphasis on everyday living of "the Way." Factors at the level of belief would appear to interrelate significantly with effects of processes of change taking place in modern Thailand, helping to elucidate the appeal of Sekai Kyūseikyō in Thailand and the distinctive characteristics it has there. It must be seen as a Buddhist lay movement, in the main, which has appropriated some of Sekai Kyūseikyō's distinctive rites and teachings as a means of expressing ideals and receiving support. As such it is still recognizably a Japanese religion, and the capacity of the ministers and members to act as "culture brokers" (in 1981) was apparently very limited.

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